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Cover Page Footnote

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Disintegrating Worldviews and the Future of Catholic Education: Addressing the Deep Roots of Catholic Disaffiliation

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Catholic schools in the United States continue to struggle with declining enrollment just as the wider American Church continues to struggle with rampant disaffiliation. While some Catholic educators have generated creative solutions to keep their schools afloat, the long-term viability of U.S. Catholic education will require understanding the deep roots of current disaffiliation trends in the gradual fading of the Christian worldview from Westerners' imaginations. This article addresses this issue by interpreting sociological data about the faith lives of Catholics and Americans in general through the lens of contemporary research on secularization. Working from these interpretive insights, the author suggests concrete implications for how an understanding of the subtle forces precipitating this momentous historical change might guide the work of Catholic educators.

Keywords

Imagination, secularization, disaffiliation, enrollment, school culture, leadership, curriculum and instruction, religious education

Thomas was the brightest student in the freshman Confirmation class I taught several years ago. His knowledge of Catholic teaching exceeded that of all his peers, yet he found these teachings incommensurate with the world as he experienced it. He understood well the Catholic belief that the world was created by a loving, omniscient, omnipotent God. However, Thomas could not reconcile these beliefs with scientific accounts of an evolving universe or the endless reports of natural disasters and human-initiated violence around the world. Faced with these seemingly contradictory visions of reality, he found himself unable to affirm the Christian account and the vision of discipleship that follows from it. Thomas honored his promise to his mother to complete the two-year Confirmation program, but immediately thereafter he stopped attending parish functions and declined to receive the sacrament.

Thomas's experience would have been virtually unfathomable in ages past, but it is common in our own. The Catholic Church is hemorrhaging members. Nearly 13% of all Americans describe themselves as "former Catholics" (Pew, 2015a). Catholic schools have seen a net loss of 3.3 million students since peak enrollment in the 1960s (NCEA, 2016). These declining numbers have resulted in the shuttering of nearly 20% of the nation's Catholic schools in the past decade (NCEA, 2016). It is evident that Catholic schools and the American Church as a whole are facing a major problem. However, it is hard to identify with precision what the cause or causes may be. According to the Pew Forum (2011), large-scale Catholic disaffiliation cannot be attributed primarily to discontent with Church teachings, clergy sex abuse scandals, or the society-wide liberalization of traditional values.

Why, then, do these former Catholics say they left? Most (71%) of these now unaffiliated former Catholics—and, in fact, most Christians of any denomination—say they "just gradually drifted away" (Pew, 2011, p. 6). Catholic educators seeking solutions to enrollment woes will no doubt find this answer unsatisfying. However, if so many disaffected Catholics are unable to articulate more precisely the factors that eroded their attachment to the Church, that is perhaps because the forces precipitating their disaffiliation are not confined to their personal life experiences but rather span several centuries and continents. Such is the argument of renowned Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor, which I examine below. Taylor (2007) and others (e.g., Greeley, 1985, 1989) give us reason to believe that Catholic drift is one consequence of a gradual shift in the way that many Christians (in the Western world especially) view reality. Like a sink hole gradually, imperceptibly widening beneath a house until it suddenly swallows it whole, a vacuum has been silently expanding in Christians' imaginations for centuries, the devastating consequences of which are only just now coming to light.

Why should Catholic educators who have their hands full with enrollment problems, curriculum mapping, and ever more rigorous standards of professional development care about issues as seemingly abstract as changes in the ways people imagine reality? Because Catholic schools purport not only to provide an excellent education but also to initiate students into the fullness of Christian life (USCCB, 2005), the cultural and psychological factors influencing how people view and live their lives are of vital concern for Catholic educators. The work of shaping Christian imaginations and identities bears upon every aspect of the operations of Catholic schools—the school culture that promotes holistic integration of faith in students' lives, the faculty who provide flesh-and-blood models of what it means to be a

Christian disciple, the curriculum that challenges students to cultivate the mental habits required to consciously maintain a Christian worldview in the face of an unrelenting media and marketing blitzkrieg. This work of drawing each new generation into the worldview and way of life taught and modeled by Jesus Christ touches the very heart of the mission of the Catholic Church. Therefore, if Catholic educators are serious about accomplishing this mission—not merely maintaining enrollment or matching the academic standards of public schools—these changes in Catholics’ imaginations require immediate and sustained attention.

Many dedicated Catholic educators are currently doing excellent work in areas like school leadership (e.g. Boyle, Haller, & Hunt, 2016), school culture (e.g. Neidhart & Lamb, 2016), and alternative school models (e.g. Aldana, 2015)—all of which contribute to the larger goal of bringing students into the fullness of the Christian life. Educators will be able to maximize the impact of these various initiatives, promote more efficacious collaboration, and better anticipate future problems to the extent they recognize that many of the challenges they face share a common root cause—the gradual shift in Christians’ imaginations that I will illuminate in the following pages. Bearing this goal in mind, I begin with a brief examination of recent sociological data, which suggests that the problem in question is both commonly misconceived and more pervasive than most Catholic educators realize. I then explain how contemporary scholarship on secularization sheds light on the root cause of these problems, highlighting its significance for the work of handing on the Christian faith. In the conclusion, I gesture toward some concrete implications for how understanding this momentous historical change might impact the work of Catholic educators.

The Lives of American Christians: Wider Trends of Change

That the U.S. Catholic Church is losing members is undeniable. Less obvious to casual observation is why this disaffiliation is occurring. The assumption that unpalatable teachings or the sex abuse scandal is responsible for most Catholics’ disaffiliation is not supported by survey data (Pew, 2011). Likewise, the theory embodied in apocalyptic news headlines and advocated by thinkers like Weber (1905/1930), Marx (1844/1972), and Durkheim (1893/1984) that secularization (understood here as decline in religious belief and practice) is the inevitable result of modernization has proven inadequate (Hervieu-Leger, 2001). The picture that emerges from carefully examining the lives of American Christians is far more complex than a simplistic narrative of linear religious decline.

The methodological question of how to objectively evaluate people's faith lives is a thorny one. Out of respect for the complexity of these issues, my question in this section will be a restrained one: Do the beliefs and behaviors evident in sociological data disclose a patterned deviation from the norms of the Christian faith as it has traditionally been understood (as opposed to the episodic lapses to be expected of fallible human beings)? While there are many legitimate ways to live out the Christian faith, some elements are non-negotiable. From the earliest days of Christianity, four pillars have been used to describe the Christian life in its fullness—knowing the faith, celebrating the sacraments, living in a manner consistent with the faith, and prayer (Acts 2:42; Benedict XVI, 2005, no. 20; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 3). These four pillars provide a traditionally grounded framework for examining the changing faith lives of contemporary Catholics as they compare with those of Americans in general. It should also be noted that this investigation is further complicated by the scarcity of longitudinal data on these topics. In cases where no other data is available, I compare results from different surveys. While doing so limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the data, it will at least provide a general sense of long-term trends.

The first pillar of Catholic faith is knowledge of the faith. Many Catholic leaders and educators today are under the impression that their students are less knowledgeable than previous generations. It is safe to say that today's young Catholics cannot recite answers to *Baltimore Catechism* questions as their grandparents could. Nonetheless, the little longitudinal data available surprisingly suggest that Catholics may have actually grown more knowledgeable in recent decades. Between 1979-80 and 2011-12, eighth-grade students' accuracy on NCEA-designed Catholic knowledge exams improved from 64% to 73% and 11th and 12th grade students' accuracy improved from 63% to 71% (Convey, 1992, 1999; NCEA, 2012). These data represent the most objective measure available regarding changes in Catholic knowledge levels. Unfortunately, how much actual improvement occurred is unclear since NCEA used different instruments across this time span. Still, if Catholics are in fact growing more knowledgeable as these statistics suggest, this would fit the wider trend of improving religious knowledge among the general U.S. population (Greeley, 1985; Pew, 2010). With respect to this first pillar of Christian faith, then, the available evidence does not provide adequate justification for the conclusion that people are leaving the Catholic faith because they do not understand it.

Catholics' celebration of the sacraments (the second pillar) is a different story, with clear declines in baptisms, marriages, and weekly worship attendance over the past 50 years (CARA, 2016; Pew, 2015b). Comparing the data on Catholics to the data on Americans in general, the modest decline in worship attendance among the general population pales in comparison with what the Catholic Church has suffered (Greeley, 1989; Pew, 2015b). However, it should be noted that, given the fact that Catholic attendance rates in the early 1960s were 30% higher than historical averages for the general population, recent declines in Catholic attendance actually reflect a return to more normal attendance levels. Still, when it comes to the past decade, Catholic rates of Mass attendance match the wider trend. Americans in general are attending weekly worship slightly less than was typical for most of the past century.

With respect to the third pillar, an examination of survey data on how Catholics live out Christian teaching reveals a complicated picture. The percentages of Catholics approving of the death penalty (ARDA, 2014a), birth control (Newport, 2012), euthanasia (ARDA, 2008), and divorce (Greeley, 1989)—all condemned in Church teaching—historically have been only slightly lower than that of Americans in general. Catholics' views on abortion have grown more similar to those of Americans in general over the past two decades (Gallup, 2014a; Newport, 2009), and historically their views have actually been more permissive than the general population on the issue of premarital sex (Greeley, 1989). Catholics have likewise followed the general trend of Americans' increasing acceptance of gay people and their lives, including same-sex marriage (ARDA, 2014b). The most salient trend in this data set, therefore, is that Catholics' moral views are increasingly diverging from official Church teaching and approximating popular opinion. Looking beyond these moral issues to other aspects of living out the faith (e.g., tithing and parish involvement), the picture does not get any less complicated, with Catholics showing signs of religious commitment in some areas but not others (Duin, 2001; Greeley, 1989; Greeley & Rossi, 1966; Pew, 2008b).

Finally, survey data reveal that, even if increasing numbers of Americans are opting out of organized religion, that does not mean they are encountering God any less than in the past. In fact, they may even be doing so more frequently. The percentage of Catholics praying at least once a day increased from 52% in 1972 to 62% in 1984 (Greeley, 1985) and was holding steady at 62.1% as recently as 2014 (ARDA, 2014c). Again, this fits the general trend among Americans (ARDA, 2014c; Greeley, 1989). Furthermore, the percent-

age of Americans reporting ever having a spiritual experience (Greeley, 1989) and experiencing feelings of spiritual peace, well-being, and wonder (Pew, 2015b) is on the rise. Therefore, whatever changes may be occurring in the United States context, it does not appear that Americans are growing more distant from God.

What, then, do these trends reveal about the faith lives of American Catholics? It would seem that the cultural commentators are correct that a major change has occurred in American Catholicism and American religion in general. The shifts in Catholic beliefs and behaviors evident in the sociological data do indeed disclose a patterned deviation from the norms of the Christian faith as they have traditionally been understood. More specifically, the clear decline in Catholics' sacramental celebration and increasing divergence from official teaching on some moral issues explains why some perceive Catholicism to be in decline. Yet, increased activity in other areas—parish involvement, prayer, experiences of the divine—defies secularization theorists' narrative of an inevitable decline in religiosity.

Other scholars have recently arrived at similar conclusions about the inadequacy of the old paradigm of secularization. For example, Warren Goldstein (2009b) suggests that secularization may be more accurately described as following cyclical, dialectical, or paradoxical patterns rather than a linear trajectory. As for why societies become more secularized, scholars propose a variety of causes. Steve Bruce (2002) argues that increased individualism and egalitarianism undermine traditional religious authority, making belief in God a personal preference rather than an existential necessity. Others (e.g., Goldstein 2009a) seek to rehabilitate classic theories that explain secularization in terms of "rationalization" (the replacement of religious motivators for societal behaviors by supposedly more rational ones) and social "differentiation" (civil entities assuming roles and meanings previously held by religious entities).

David Martin (1969, 2017) and José Casanova (2006) further explode simplistic secularization narratives by suggesting that what is commonly referred to as secularization is not a unitary, universal phenomenon that can be attributed to a single cause. Indeed, scholars are often not even working from a single agreed upon definition when they employ the terms "secularization" (see Casanova, 2006) and "secularity" (see Taylor, 2007). Casanova (2006), building upon S. N. Eisenstadt's (2000) theory of "multiple modernities," argues that societies undergoing a process of modernization may share some common traits, but these traits take multiple forms and become

institutionalized in different ways in different contexts. In contrast with the more simplistic secularization narratives that sometimes make their way into news headlines and lay thinking, Casanova's and Eisenstadt's work makes clear that the fruits of modernity—critical methods of scholarship, scientific discovery, technological innovation, industrialization, mass media, the spread of democracy—have impacted religion and religious practice in diverse and complex ways. Most influential among recent scholarship on secularization is the work of Charles Taylor, whose landmark book *A Secular Age* (2007) presents a finely textured yet wide-ranging narrative of the disintegration of Western Christendom. Because Taylor's writing incorporates key elements from most of the scholarship just mentioned, it is his work that I will draw upon most extensively in the historical account I present below.

If the data examined above and the secularization scholarship just surveyed do not offer much support for the theory that current changes in religion are the inevitable result of modernization, they may support a similar but more nuanced conclusion, namely, that the successive waves of modernity and postmodernity have disrupted and complicated established beliefs, practices, and forms of religion. In this view, the changes presently shaping American Catholicism are best understood as symptoms of the breakdown of a particular approach to inhabiting the world. Without succumbing to the fantasy of a golden age of Christianity, it is safe to say that up until the 20th century most Christians viewed the world in a way that was profoundly influenced by their Christian faith and that provided a mental framework for making sense of their lives (Taylor, 2007). Even if they sometimes failed to live up to their convictions, these older Catholics believed that, if they assented to the teaching of the Church, participated in the sacraments, and otherwise served God in this world, they would be “happy with Him for ever in heaven” (*Baltimore Catechism*, 1885/2005, Question 150). That worldview has now broken down. Many Catholics no longer find meaning in the sacraments or see the relevance of Church teaching for their everyday lives. Despite their continued desire to relate to God, these former and marginal Catholics are forfeiting the integrating framework that sustained their ancestors, even as their lives grow increasingly fragmented.

A Short History of the Dis-integration of American Catholic Imaginations

The data just examined debunk two faulty assumptions about Catholic disaffiliation: (a) that it is primarily the result of problems internal to the

Church and (b) that this disaffiliation signals the clear decline of religion. In contrast with these erroneous assumptions, I have posited the theory that (a) these changing patterns in the faith lives of American Catholics are part of a larger phenomenon and (b) this phenomenon is more accurately characterized as the dis-integration of a particular worldview.

While this theory coheres better with the available data than the alternative, the data do not in themselves guarantee the correctness of this theory. Indeed, no data set ever confirms a theory definitively. Charles Taylor raises a similar methodological point in *A Secular Age* (2007). He argues that, because secularization occurred through a long chain of historical contingencies—as opposed to the strategic actions of particular individuals or groups—presenting the evidence in narrative fashion is indispensable for understanding how the current state of affairs came to be. Other scholars have described such an approach as an exercise in “narrative rationality” (Bruner, 1986; Fitz, 2010; Uelmen, 2016). Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, together with the work of Columbia University scholar Andrew Delbanco, tells a story that proves helpful for Catholic educators trying to connect the dots among sociological data points.

At the core of Taylor’s (2007) story is Western Christendom’s unwitting shift from an “enchanted” imaginary to a “disenchanted” one (p. 25). An “imaginary” in Taylor’s (2007) terminology refers to the way people collectively and pre-theoretically imagine the universe/cosmos and society in which they live (p. 146). It is the lens through which a group sees the world rather than the words or beliefs they use to describe what they see. An imaginary is a social phenomenon, a set of assumptions that people living together in society hold in common. Individual persons’ ways of imagining the world presuppose and participate in the social imaginary, but no two individuals imagine the world exactly the same. Hence, when I employ the plural term “Catholic imaginations,” I do so to distinguish the unique ways individuals imagine reality from the collective imaginary. This distinction serves to emphasize the effect of the dissolution of the shared Christian imaginary on the level of the individual.

Taylor explains that in the old enchanted (Christian) imaginary, which held sway up until 500 years ago, the vast majority of people perceived themselves as living in a world where natural events were controlled by God and evil spirits and in which the boundaries between human agency and external influences were porous. Andrew Delbanco describes the early days of American history in similar terms. “In the first phase of our civilization,” writes Delbanco (1999), Americans expressed their sense of the purposefulness of

life “through a Christian story that gave meaning to suffering and pleasure alike and promised deliverance from death” (pp. 3-4). In this God-centered phase, which lasted for the better part of 200 years, colonials (mostly Protestants) ascribed nothing to chance; all was within God’s providence. Their imagined condition, which was formed primarily by the 15,000 hours of sermons each person was likely to hear in their lifetime, was that of helplessness in a world largely beyond their control and of utter dependence on God.

By Taylor’s (2007) account, things began to change in Europe around the time of the Renaissance. New enthusiasm for understanding nature and rigorous methods of reasoned inquiry precipitated challenges to long-held, naive beliefs about God, the world, and society. Initially this new interest in science and learning and the confidence it inspired in human abilities and knowledge posed no direct threat to belief in God. However, in order to accommodate new understandings of the natural world, Christians adjusted their image of God, resulting in what Taylor (2007) terms “Providential Deism” (p. 221). In this view, God is imagined as a distant Creator who created the universe and thereafter allowed it to operate independently upon fixed laws, which are knowable by the human mind. Pew survey data suggest that nearly one third of self-identified Catholics may currently envision God in such impersonal terms (Pew, 2008a)

At the same time, people were beginning to re-imagine everyday life. In the spirit of the Reformation, some Christians rejected the presumption that holiness was the special possession of a few priests and religious and so made an intentional effort to affirm the “ordinary” life lived by the vast majority of people. Ironically, in holding everyone to a supposedly higher standard of holiness, the elites discouraged ordinary Christians from participating in many of the practices that had sustained their faith (e.g., veneration of saints and Eucharistic adoration). This “Reform” (p. 61), as Taylor (2007) calls it, amounted to an “excarnation” (p. 554) of the Christian faith. Taylor (2007) explains:

We have moved from an era in which religious life was more ‘embodied’, where the presence of the sacred could be enacted in ritual, or seen, felt, touched, walked towards (in pilgrimage); into one which is more ‘in the mind’, where the link with God passes more through our endorsing contested interpretations—for instance, of our political identity as religiously defined, or of God as the authority and moral source underpinning our ethical life. (p. 554)

It is significant that the United States declared its independence and established its founding principles during the Age of Enlightenment when Providential Deism had gained widespread currency. During this period, Enlightenment rationality came to exert its influence on Christianity with the result that, as Delbanco (1999) explains, an experience of transcendence in relation to nation replaced the sense of transcendence Americans had previously experienced in relation to God. The same thinking that Taylor (2007) describes Enlightenment thinkers applying to the natural world was applied to the world of politics. America's Founding Fathers established the new nation upon certain truths that they deemed "self-evident"—that is, knowable through the use of natural powers of reason—and that therefore ought to form the foundation of social relations among human beings. An emerging body of American literature produced by authors like Longfellow, Emerson, Hale, Whitman, and Melville facilitated the transformation by converting old religious symbols into symbols of national transcendence. Where Americans had previously looked to God as their savior from the dangers and evils of the world, increasing numbers now looked to the "redeemer nation" (Delbanco, 1999, p. 77). In this way, a newly deified people and nation displaced God in the American imaginary, even as the rhetoric of one nation "under God" continued to echo from sea to shining sea.

The marginalization of God in American imaginations mirrors what Taylor (2007) describes occurring across Europe. Around the turn of the 18th century, Christians still by and large believed themselves to be acting in a manner faithful to their religion. On their understanding, God had given them their powers of reason and expected them to make use of them. Notwithstanding, this reimagining of God as a distant clockmaker, however well intentioned, subtly yet significantly changed people's attitudes about transcendent reality. With God removed from the day-to-day affairs of the world, they increasingly came to perceive their universe through an "immanent frame" in which all sense of the sacredness of certain times and places had given way to an impersonal order of natural laws and cold matter. Old, embodied expressions of Christian piety such as relics and religious feasts like Carnival were denounced as superstitious and base. According to Taylor (2007), "God's power was no longer something you could feel or see in the old way; it now had to be discerned in the design of things" (p. 329). As society's collective memory of an incarnational God faded and people's understanding of the universe grew, it became difficult to imagine what role God played at all. Having been gradually hollowed out for centuries, the shell of Christianity that remained would soon be easy to discard.

Little by little, Christianity had been edged out by “exclusive humanism,” an alternative imaginary characterized by concern for human flourishing that presumes the self-sufficiency of human powers, as embodied in the writing of Friedrich Nietzsche, for example (Taylor, 2007). However, no sooner had exclusive humanism achieved its victory over Christianity than people began to find this alternative equally unsatisfying. Modern Westerners, now confronted with two seemingly untenable options, began to despair of the meaningfulness of reality. A plethora of alternative accounts of human flourishing emerged, seeking to fill the void and resulting in what Taylor (2007) describes as “a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane” (p. 300). However, none of the many new positions possessed the power of the old Christian imaginary or achieved as widespread an influence.

Similar dynamics were at play in the U.S. during the 1960s when Americans began to grow disillusioned with the national ideal on account of the war in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal. Having displaced God, the deified nation now, too, found itself out of favor. This led into what Delbanco (1999) terms the stage of the “self,” which reflects Taylor’s (2007) description of exclusive humanism and the “expressive individualism” that emerged through the “nova effect” (p. 473). In this current stage of American history, many people have ceased seeking something greater than themselves, instead making diversion and self-gratification their chief aim. This “me” culture was fueled by the rise of consumerism in the U.S. in the mid-1970s (Miller, 2004). New approaches to production and management, the replacement of the homestead with the single-family home, the explosion of new media like cable TV and the Internet, and new marketing techniques that exploited modern media not only transformed the day-to-day lives of Americans but also imbued their thoughts about family, personal identity, religion, and all aspects of life with a commodifying mindset.

The impact of this media explosion on people’s imaginations cannot be overstated. Delbanco observes that sermons and literature, respectively, were the primary modes of forming Americans’ imaginations in earlier stages of the country’s history. In each case, the media of choice formed people in a unified vision—either of a universe under God’s control or of a nation in which people could collectively achieve transcendence. As opposed to the oral and text-based cultures of the past, today’s culture has been called the “civilization of the image” (Barthes, 1977, p. 175). Where artificial images were rare in previous ages, today the average North American sees approximately 6,000 marketing messages on a daily basis (Scatamburlo, 2010). The average American consumes 15.5 hours of media content each day (Short, 2015).

Within such a consumption-driven, media-saturated culture, religion becomes one more commodity from which consumers can select symbols and practices that suit their desires but that makes no real existential or spiritual demands on them because these symbols and practices have been extracted from the traditions that gave them meaning. On the one hand, traditional religious symbols still exercise significant power over the imaginations of many Americans. Belief in heaven and hell seems to be as high today as it was in the 1950s (Greeley, 1989; Pew, 2008a), and belief in the Devil and angels has actually increased since 1990 (Gallup, 2014b; Pew, 2008a). On the other hand, these symbols do not dominate modern Americans' view of reality as they did that of their predecessors. Today many other images vie for Americans' imaginations—images of patriotism and financial success; images of other religions' gods; images of a mechanistic, creatorless universe.

The cumulative effect over time has been that, even among Catholics who have remained Catholic in name, their imaginations have become as generically American as those of the general population. Just as many Enlightenment Christians ceased to see the relevance of God in a universe where all natural events could be explained scientifically, so too are many Americans who were raised Catholic now failing to see the relevance of the Catholic trappings of their lives, which in every meaningful sense have come to mirror those of their non-Catholic neighbors. These are the former Catholics, who, with little that is distinctively Catholic shaping their imaginations, “just gradually drifted away.”

Analysis: Fragmented Imaginations, Fragmented Lives

The narrative sketched above presents a mere skeleton of the fuller story painted by Taylor and Delbanco. Those interested in a fuller telling should read *A Secular Age* (Taylor, 2007) and *The Real American Dream* (Delbanco, 1999) in their entirety. Still, bare bones as it is, the narrative presented here helps make sense of the data examined in the first part of the article and the troubling current trends in Catholic education.

The data themselves support neither the assumption that Catholics are abandoning the faith primarily due to internal Church issues, nor the theory that Catholic disaffiliation is one manifestation of an inevitable religious decline. Taylor's (2007) and Delbanco's (1999) narratives further discredit these two assumptions. Instead they support the alternative theory that the conditions for Catholic disaffiliation were set by a centuries-long shift from an enchanted, Christian imaginary to a disenchanted, immanent frame. Re-

ligious beliefs and practices like the doctrine of the Trinity, Christian sexual ethics, the sacraments, and prayer devotions depend for their meaningfulness upon an underlying imaginary that integrates these beliefs and practices within a coherent view of reality. With the dissolution of the old Christian imaginary, Catholic practices lost their grounding, though it would be centuries before people noticed the rug had been pulled out from underneath them. Many tried to fill the void with an exclusive humanism, but, when that proved insufficient to supply the meaning and purpose provided by the old Christian imaginary, a supernova of alternative visions of human fulfillment exploded onto the scene. The proliferation of modern media has ensured the unremitting presence of these many competing visions in people's homes and ear buds, and the permeation of the commodifying mindset in 20th-century consumer culture has encouraged a dilettantish approach to people's pursuit of fulfillment.

The consequence of living in an era of disenchantment has been the fragmentation and disorientation of Americans' lives. In the words of Sharon Daloz Parks (2000):

They find themselves living fragmented lives, piecing together various scraps of discrete meaning, each with its own center of value, power, and affection, each with its own god...many people yearn for a sense of deep integration in their lives but experience...each sphere oriented to differing values, expectations and loyalties. (p. 22)

Taylor (2007) likewise testifies, "everyone understands the complaint that our disenchanted world lacks meaning, that in this world, particularly youth suffer from a lack of strong purposes in their lives" (p. 303). Battered about by so many conflicting messages and images, people are paralyzed by the prospect of having to choose a single life path or center of value (Markus & Schwartz, 2010).

Speaking to the religious dimension of people's lives, theologian Roberto Goizueta (2004) once predicted:

the only religious faith acceptable for a consumerist society is precisely that which presupposes symbolic malleability and interchangeability (separation of form and content) since, lacking a social body that distinguishes such faith from its environment, it is the kind of faith most easily subsumed within the social body that we call the Market. A dis-

embedded, disembodied, deinstitutionalized spirituality will become de facto the spirituality of the thoroughly embedded, embodied, institutionalized global Market of late capitalism. (p. 271)

Indeed, this is precisely the sort of religion that survey data show to be emerging in the United States. Devoid of an embodied, sacramental framework in which concrete actions and habits are understood as playing an important role in the work of salvation, fewer and fewer Catholics recognize the relevance of the sacraments for their lives. Today's Catholics have grown up with the assurance of the surrounding culture that "you're OK; I'm OK" and received constant encouragement from consumer culture to select whatever appeals to them from the varied offerings of the modern spiritual marketplace. The result is a hodgepodge of quasi-Catholic moral convictions that is virtually indistinguishable from the convictions of the wider population. Yet none of this is to say that spirituality and religion are on the way out. As diverse and incoherent Americans' means of expressing their spiritual longings may be, increased levels of prayer (ARDA, 2014c; Greeley, 1989) and the booming spirituality book market (Moore, 2017) stand as evidence that their yearning for transcendence, meaning, and fulfillment remains as strong as ever.

Taylor's (2007) and Delbanco's (1999) narratives also make clear that these momentous changes in modern American religion cannot be attributed primarily to declining religious knowledge or to people making a conscious decision to reject their Christian faith (although there are doubtless a multitude of contributing factors). Taylor's point is that the transformation has been so effective and thorough precisely because it occurred at the level of people's preconscious assumptions about reality, that is, in their imaginations more than in their intellects. Consequently, Catholic educators should not be surprised to find students and their parents unable to articulate with precision the factors that have diminished the influence of Christianity in their lives. What educators are more likely to encounter is the following: high school students like Thomas, who ace every religion exam but are thoroughly unpersuaded by the Christian message; college students whose behavior on the weekends exhibits a complete disconnect with their expressed faith commitments; parents who experience a vestigial desire for their children to receive the sacraments but who cannot see what added benefit a Catholic school offers when compared with an excellent public school. Such attitudes are symptomatic of a transformation that has thoroughly—but unbeknownst to them—altered Catholics' imaginations.

Implications for Catholic Education Today

The sociological data and historical narratives examined above reveal that the problem facing Catholic education is far bigger than most of us could have imagined. It is a problem confronting the entire (formerly) Christian West. How do Catholic educators respond to a problem of this magnitude? This is a question deserving far more space than I have to answer here. Indeed, a response to this question will be the work of the current generation and perhaps several generations to come. Nonetheless, the analysis offered above does suggest a number of concrete responses that may at least serve to stimulate thinking around this question.

Underlying all of the following proposals is Taylor's (2007) insight that, in order to arrive at the present quasi-secular culture, people had to be able to imagine a universe and a life without God and the Christian religion. Now that this possibility has entered into the popular imagination, we cannot unimagine it. What Taylor's account makes clear for Catholic educators is that, to have any hope of fulfilling the mission of bringing our students into the fullness of the Christian life, educators need to help them imagine the Christian view of reality as a viable one and, indeed, as richer and more life-giving than the secular alternatives. How can educators accomplish this task? I offer below some suggestive proposals within three areas of current concern in Catholic education—school culture, curriculum and instruction, and leadership formation.

School Culture

The importance of promoting a strong Catholic culture in schools has received ample attention in recent years (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009; Cook & Simonds, 2011; Neidhart & Lamb, 2016). As the percentage of clergy and religious working in Catholic schools has plummeted from 92% in 1920 to 2.8% in 2016, their lay successors have increasingly come to recognize how difficult that ethos is to reproduce with an overwhelmingly lay workforce (NCEA, 2016; Smarick, 2011). The priests and religious who ran Catholic schools in times past were able to infuse their schools with a strong Catholic identity because they themselves lived and breathed Catholicism. It pervaded everything they did (or at least this was the ideal presented to them in their religious formation). The same cannot be said of many contemporary lay people, despite their best intentions. Efforts to foster a Catholic culture and Catholic imaginations are further complicated by the current pluralistic, consumer culture, which conditions students to select and consume mean-

ing and identity markers in “bricolage fashion” (Miller, 2004, p. 171). Hanging religious artwork in the hallways, posting the school mission statement in classrooms, and reciting prayers throughout the day constitute positive but insufficient steps toward fostering a robust Catholic school culture. They are insufficient because, if students do not cultivate imaginations that are Catholic at their core, they will likely appropriate such religious symbols in a hodgepodge manner alongside secular ones, the same way they add stickers of various brands and musical artists to the back of their computers. Ann Casson’s (2013) study of Catholic schools in England illustrates how fragmentary the Catholic identities of students often are today, even having been educated in schools with earnest intentions of handing on the faith.

If modern Catholic educators are to succeed in cultivating school cultures powerful enough and Catholic imaginations resilient enough to counter a culture shaped by consumerism and media overload, they must strive to promote a coherent Catholic culture that pervades all school policies, interactions, classes, activities, and aspects of the environment. Intentional planning is obviously essential for creating a consistent school culture. However, Schein (1982) points out that the mechanisms of culture leaders imbed in organizational policies and structures are secondary in importance relative to the primary mechanisms that bring an institution’s vision to life in the day-to-day. These primary mechanisms include what an organization’s leaders (i.e., school administrators, teachers, and staff) pay attention to; their reactions to critical incidents and organizational crises; deliberate role modelling, teaching, and coaching; and criteria for bestowing rewards and status.

Applied to the Catholic school context, Schein’s (1982) work underscores the need, on the one hand, to craft a student handbook that genuinely reflects Catholic beliefs and values. For example, sections of the handbook that detail expectations and consequences pertaining to student conduct can be written to include explicitly Catholic language about the goodness and sinfulness of human beings and God’s justice and mercy in tandem with policies that reflect these Catholic beliefs (e.g., mechanisms for personal reform and reparation in addition to or in lieu of less meaningful detention time). On the other hand and perhaps even more importantly, it is essential that administrators, faculty, and staff implement handbook policies in ways that incarnate these beliefs. For example, a teacher who addresses an instance of plagiarism by justly but uncompassionately failing the student for the assignment without any real discussion of the matter does not necessarily embody the Catholic beliefs that humans are both sinful and created in the *imago Dei* and that

God is both just and merciful. This Catholic worldview is better conveyed by a teacher who discusses with the student the betrayal of communal and divine trust implied in academic dishonesty and listens to the student's explanation of the circumstances that led them to make this ill-advised decision (perhaps in addition to failing them for the assignment).

I offer the student handbook example as one "close up" detail of the big picture of what it looks like when the Catholic imaginary pervades the whole of a school's culture. Timothy Cook's and Thomas Simonds's (2011) article "The Charism of 21st-Century Catholic Schools" offers another aspect of the picture, helpfully describing how the Catholic commitment to loving relationship can undergird a coherent framework for thinking about Catholic identity and charism. Fostering a consistent Catholic culture also ideally involves connecting with others beyond schools walls, for students spend far more time outside of school than they do inside. In particular students' Catholic formation is greatly aided when Catholic educators support, educate, and partner with parents to immerse their students in a consistent Catholic environment connecting home and school (Crea, Reynolds, & Degnan, 2015; Frabutt et al., 2013). In sum, by planning well and taking care to respond to even mundane details in a manner inspired by Catholic faith, Catholic educators can create the cultural consistency needed to form coherently Catholic imaginations.

Curriculum and Instruction

Religion class plays a special role in drawing together the holistic formation efforts of a Catholic school. In their religion classes students have a prime opportunity to reflect explicitly on who they want to be and how all the various aspects of their education are forming their Catholic identity. However, such formation is not automatic. The fact of the matter is that the Church's mechanisms for handing on the faith have too often stifled rather than ignited students' imaginations (Cote, 2003). Imaginative thinking about the faith is sparked by story, art, and poetry (Guare, 1999; Harris, 1987). Yet the abstract language of doctrine has figured more prominently (though certainly not exclusively) than the poetic in official Church documents and teaching, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) *Doctrinal Elements of a Curriculum Framework for the Development of Catechetical Materials for Young People of High School Age* (2008), which now governs religious education in this country's Catholic high schools (Cote, 2003; O'Malley, 2009).

Religion teachers need to be particularly intentional about engaging students imaginatively as schools continue to implement the bishops' *Framework* (2008), which is essentially comprised of a collection of outlines of doctrinal points from the *Catechism*. The *Framework's* authors themselves state that they never intended it to be used as a tool for direct instruction (USCCB, 2008). Considerable pedagogical enhancement is required, going beyond explication and even analysis of doctrine in order to engage students' imaginations. For example, beyond simply explaining what it means when the Church defines a sacrament as an "efficacious sign of grace" (USCCB, 2008, p. 20), teachers can guide students in recounting their memories of receiving Reconciliation or the Eucharist; reading John 1:1-18 and unpacking what it means for God, who is pure spirit, to relate to us through material things; and brainstorming how students can sacramentalize God's love for others in their words and actions. These examples represent a sampling of an imagination-centered pedagogy that I have developed more fully elsewhere (Manning, 2015). Catholic educators will find additional pedagogical possibilities in Louis Delfra's (2013) narrative approach to teaching theology and Maria Harris's classic *Teaching and Religious Imagination* (1987), in which she presents an approach to incarnating the subject matter that empowers students' to imaginatively re-create themselves and the world. The imaginative pedagogy embodied in these approaches goes well beyond what the *Framework* explicitly requires, but this kind of imagination-focused learning is essential if students are to absorb Catholic doctrine in a way that meaningfully influences their view of the world and their living therein.

Because student formation efforts must be consistent if they are to be effective, teachers of other subjects can and should employ this kind of imaginatively-engaged pedagogy as well. Although some might be concerned that greater focus on the imagination would compromise academic rigor, Egan, Stout, and Takaya (2007) provide ample examples to convince educators that the opposite is true—engaging students imaginatively leads to improved learning outcomes, even in subjects like mathematics and the sciences. Encouraged by this research, science teachers might stir students' imaginations to see the wonder of God's creation by leading them in hands-on experiments or supplementing astronomy lectures with actual video of outer space. When history teachers tell stories about humanity's common past, they can encourage students to imagine how the lessons of history apply to their own lives and how Catholic teachings on sin and grace help to make sense of the tragedies and triumphs of human history. The fine arts present another spe-

cial opportunity for forming students' imaginations (Starratt, 1999). In an era when the Church has lost its hold over people's imaginations, there is great need for Catholic artists with the skill and creativity to evangelize imaginations. If Catholic educators are truly dedicated to the Church's mission of evangelization and initiating people into the fullness of the Christian life, it becomes a solemn duty to form not only ethical entrepreneurs and lawyers but also the artists who will inspire the next generation of Catholics.

Leadership Formation

Fostering a consistently Catholic school culture and crafting an imaginative Catholic curriculum depends upon faculty, staff, and especially principals who understand and support these efforts (Belmont & Cranston, 2009). Leaders in principal formation have offered the National Benchmarks and Standards for Effective Catholic Schools (Boyle, Haller, & Hunt, 2016) and the NCEA Catholic Identity Assessment (Rieckhoff, 2014) as two useful tools that leaders-in-training can employ to guide their thinking about students', faculty members', and their own faith development. The research presented earlier in this article suggests that school leaders will be able to make better use of such tools if they understand the foundational role the imagination plays in meaning-filled concepts like faith, purpose, and culture. Leadership formation and professional development programs can promote this foundational understanding by supplementing more commonplace study of learner psychology with study of how the imagination functions in the work of human meaning construction. While the work of neuroscientists like Antonio Damasio (1994) provides a scientific backbone for such study, Catholic educators will find the writing of theoretically-informed Christian authors like James Smith most beneficial. To mention just two helpful texts, Smith's *How (Not) to Be Secular* (2014) presents a summary of Charles Taylor's historical-cultural analysis that is more detailed than the brief synopsis I offered above. Smith's book *Imagining the Kingdom* (2013) offers a sophisticated account of how human beings make sense of their lives and draws implications for Christian formation in the school context (particularly for Christian colleges).

A second important component of leadership and faculty formation—one that many leadership programs already include in some form—is cultivating skills for community-building. As Vince Miller (2016) explains, the media structures and cultural conditions that enabled the Catholic Church to form its American members so well in the middle part of the 20th century have

ceased to exist and will likely never be reproduced. Nevertheless, Christian formation in the age of modern media is not a lost cause, for other resources remain, community being the most significant among them. Human beings are highly social, mimetic creatures--our views and behaviors are strongly influenced by those of others. Various studies suggest that the behaviors of one's peers is a strong predictor of one's own behaviors such as smoking habits (Vries, 2003), risk taking (Gardner, 2005), and academic achievement (Mounts, 1995). Our imaginaries and perceptions of reality, too, are social phenomena, as Charles Taylor (2007) explains. It makes sense, then, that in the final chapter of *A Secular Age*, Taylor identifies "networks of living concern"—the sort of community of love the Church strives to be—as essential to the perpetual renewal of the Christian faith that makes it distinctive and life-giving (p. 743). In an age when formation via traditional didactic approaches makes only a negligible impact, helping students integrate into a network of peers, parents, and mentors who value their Catholic faith and see the world with Christian eyes is key to instilling a sense of value for the faith.

It is thus clear why building community is vital to Catholic education. As for how to build that community, school leaders will find helpful guidance in the existing literature. To begin most basically, Sergiovanni (1994) emphasizes the powerful effect of a shared sense of purpose--Catholic educators might say "mission" (e.g., James & Estanek, 2012)—for forging community among members of a school. At the classroom level, Sergiovanni recommends employing democratic processes (e.g., collaboratively generating expectations and consequences that teacher and students will honor for the semester) in order to foster "buy-in" and a sense of ownership among students. Homan and her colleagues (2001) advise starting with school administrators, faculty, and staff, creating an environment of mutuality and caring that they can in turn model for students. Writing out of his experience of instituting a house system at his Catholic high school, Michael Brennan (2012) offers findings that are applicable to high schools of all sorts, including the community-building benefits of students remaining in contact with the same faculty members year to year and of ongoing interaction among students from different grade levels. More than a collection of discrete strategies, a commitment to building community and relationships should be the inspiration and *modus operandi* for all that occurs within a Catholic school, as Cook and Simonds (2013) have argued well.

Conclusion

The Catholic Church and Catholic schools have a wonderful gift to offer today's students—nothing less than the “life in abundance” Jesus promised his own students two millennia ago (Jn 10:10). Jesus's dramatic actions and vivid storytelling bespeak his understanding that transforming people's imaginations is essential for prompting their conversion to this fuller way of life. Effective continuation of Jesus's mission hinges upon contemporary Christian educators' ability to likewise invite such transformation. Still, while the crucial role of the imagination in human thinking and living has not changed since Jesus's time, the cultural factors shaping our imaginations undoubtedly have. Students like Thomas, who simply do not see the relevance of Christianity for their lives, may soon outnumber their believing peers in our classrooms, that is, assuming they bother to enroll in Catholic schools at all. Yet the problem is not merely a Catholic problem. Many of today's young people are floundering in their search for any source of stability capable of giving meaning and purpose to their lives. It is no wonder, looking at the world they have grown up in—weekly terrorist attacks, global economic instability, political acrimony, an impending environmental crisis. This social discord might not be so psychologically devastating were it not for the fact many young Catholics have inherited a faith tradition that—at least in their eyes—lacks depth and coherence. They may still be seeking and finding God, but they and their parents are less likely to do so in the context of the Eucharist or the other sacraments. They may honor Catholic moral teaching in some areas, but they disregard it in others.

It is putting it mildly to assert that teachers of the faith can no longer rely on a pervasive Catholic culture to form their students. That culture no longer exists, or, if it does, only in a dwindling number of isolated enclaves. This is why recent popes have called for a “New Evangelization” in our time (Benedict XVI, 2010; Francis, 2013; John Paul II, 1990). As Pope Francis acknowledges in the *Joy of the Gospel* (2013), it is not only non-Christians who are who are in need of evangelization. Increasingly being an evangelist means sharing Jesus's message of healing and wholeness with those who for whatever reason continue to occupy the seats of Catholic churches and classrooms but whose spiritual lives are rent apart by the centrifugal forces of consumerism, media technology, globalization, and plurality. A “traditional” Catholic education will no longer suffice to restore authentic faith, meaning, and wholeness to the lives of these individuals. In order to achieve this loftier purpose, Catholic education must nurture people in that part of their being

that integrates (or fails to integrate) their diverse experiences of reality into a coherent life. That is to say, it must evangelize and transform the imagination.

In this article I have attempted to cast some light upon the hidden forces shaping modern Christians' imagination and the society they live in and offered several proposals for how Catholic educators can respond through attention to the imagination in school culture, curriculum, and leadership formation. These proposals are suggestive rather than comprehensive. An adequate response will have to address many more questions than I could answer here: How can Catholic schools engage popular culture in a way that adequately prepares students to live out their faith within that culture? What possibilities exist for utilizing technology to shape Catholic imaginations? How has the disintegration of the Christian imaginary in the West affected Latinos, who every year constitute a greater portion of the American Church? Though these and other questions require further consideration, I hope that this article will at least help Catholic educators to recognize the subtle historical and cultural forces influencing their communities and spur more thinking, research, and collaboration around the shaping of Catholic imaginations.

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